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LIBRARY LIAISON PROGRAMS IN THE 21st CENTURY

Presented by

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Foreword

As I did my research and reading for this presentation two images kept popping into my mind. The first, a visual image, was an exercise in watercolor painting. It involves taking a piece of watercolor paper, wetting it thoroughly with a sponge, then dropping big drops of different colored paint onto the paper. The water carries the drops of paint towards each other and the colors quickly begin to bleed together creating new colors and, often, unexpected and beautiful results.

My second image was the verbal image of my mother's voice. My mother once said about my father, "The only thing that is predictable about your father is that he is unpredictable."

So here I am trying to take you down the seductive but dangerous path of predicting the future regarding library liaison programs in the 21st century. The paper is wet and paint is being placed on the paper, but we don't yet know what new colors and patterns will emerge.

Library Liaison Programs Past and Present

Historical Perspective

Before we journey to the future, let's take a brief look at the development of library liaison programs in the United States during the last half of the 20th century.

Following World War II, the United States government made a lot of money available to war veterans so they could attend college. This was called the G.I. Bill. About this time a major "baby boom" occurred. These two conditions contributed toward an increase in university attendance and caused an rise in funding for libraries and subsequent collection development boom. Because interlibrary loan was in its early stages, libraries had to rely heavily on their own collections to meet patrons' needs. Librarians began working closely with academic faculty to build collections for new programs. These librarians were specialists in an academic discipline and became known

as bibliographers (Hazen, 2000).

In the mid 70's many academic libraries began to call these librarians "liaisons." Their main functions was collection development and often they were part of the reference department (Hendrix, 2000).

By the 1990's academic libraries began to change. New management philosophies such as "total quality management" and "holistic librarianship," accompanied by declining budgets and the growth of technology, resulted in changes in the organizational structure of many libraries. Hierarchical structures were "flattened" and traditional departments were replaced by "programmatic groups" or "core responsibilities" (Hendrix, 2000; Hazen, 2000).

With the dawn of the new millennium many academic libraries have begun the process of evaluating and redefining existing liaison programs in hopes of making them more relevant to today's postmodern, technology-based culture.

Definitions

We will next look at some basic definitions, goals, purposes, and activities of library liaison programs from a review of recent library literature.

The American Library Association (2001) defines liaison work as "The process by which librarians involve the library's clientele in the assessment and satisfaction of collection needs" (p. 107). The University of Connecticut Libraries' web page (2001) offers this definition of a library liaison, "A library liaison is a staff member who has been formally designated as the primary contact between the Libraries and an academic unit (school, department, center, program), of the University" (screen 1).

Does this mean that if you do not have a formally structured liaison program you are not a liaison? No. We are all liaisons. We all interact with our academic communities to promote library services and develop library resources.

Goals and Purposes

From a rather narrow focus toward collection development, the goals and purposes of a library liaison program have grown to include four main areas. Most frequently cited in the literature were: 1) communication, 2) public relations and marketing, 3) resources development, and 4) user services including reference and instruction for faculty and students. Other goals such as facilitating access to resources, program evaluation, accreditation support, academic committees, and job enrichment for library staff were also mentioned.

The importance of communication from liaison to faculty regarding resources, services and policies and from faculty to liaison regarding research, curricular and instructional needs, was

repeatedly emphasized as one of the primary goals and purposes of a liaison program. Yang (2000) found in an evaluation of the Texas A & M University Library Liaison Program that

“updating the faculty on the services available in the library” was the highest rated service of the program (p. 124-128).

Establishing a Liaison Program

The establishment of a library liaison program consists of three phases according to Suresh (1995). The first phase or “foundation” phase involves setting goals and objectives based on user needs assessment and library best practices that are consistent with the mission of the library and institution, and the campus environment. The second or “intermediate” phase includes selection and training of liaisons, development of policies, and the establishment of communication procedures between liaisons and faculty, faculty and liaisons, and between liaisons. The third or “advanced” phase involves assistance with specialized research needs and assessment of all involved in the program (Suresh, 1995; Mozenter, 2000).

Liaison development is an ongoing part of a successful program. Tennant (2001) found that communication and service were most effective when liaisons were knowledgeable in the subject area of their liaison work. According to Yang (2000), some departments felt that subject background was essential while other departments did not think it was necessary. Liaisons can develop subject expertise by attending classes or seminars, reading faculty vitae and dissertations, joining professional organizations, and talking to faculty (Tennant, 2001).

Most successful liaison programs include participation in a forum or advisory committee which provides an opportunity to “plan activities; share ideas, concerns, successes, and problems; and collaborate on activities, evaluation and program development” (Tennant, 2001, p. 14). Some forums are composed of departmental faculty representatives as well as library liaisons (Risser, 2000).

Activities

Many liaison programs outline suggested activities for each of the main goals of the program. For example, Bridgewater State College (2001) lists four main goals. Each goal has eight to ten activities from which liaisons can choose.

- 1) Communication and Instruction - sample activity: “Write a feature or column for departmental newsletter.”
- 2) Information Gathering - sample activity: “Survey faculty research interests.”
- 3) Collection Development - sample activity: “Inform new and continuing faculty of materials selection and acquisition procedures.”
- 4) Program Development - sample activity: “Establish a research partnership with a member of the liaison department.”

In sum, a review of literature of the last ten years shows that a successful liaison program can be the “unifying theme for developing library services and communication” (Tennant, 2001, p. 11), the “cornerstone of the promotion and marketing effort, and [can] lead to the development of a strong library collection that will support the curriculum and the research needs of various disciplines in the institution” (Ryans, 1995, p. 14). It is by necessity, a “product of extensive outreach by library faculty to the rest of the academic community” (Risser, 2000, p. 24).

Library Liaison Programs in the 21st Century

In this section I would like to present the forces which have caused drastic change in our world and their impact on the future of libraries and library liaison programs.

Our Changing World

Technology and postmodern culture have changed our world to such a degree that in order to survive in the 21st century, libraries need to be reinvented (Shreeves, 2000). Librarians must now examine their mission, philosophy, and structure in order to create new roles and services as they move from serving users with physical resources in a physical space to serving users with virtual resources in cyberspace (Williams, 2000; Martell, 2000).

Postmodernism, McDonalidization, and Disembodiment

The emergence of postmodernism in the second half of the 20th century, and has profoundly influenced our present society.

Postmodernism is “characterized by ambiguity , subjectivity, relativism, fluidity, multi-dimensionality, chance, and even playfulness. Modernism, by contrast, is certain, objective, universal, stable, linear, controlled, and somber” according to Ray (as cited in Rockwell-Kincannon, 2001, p. 593). “Whereas modernism espouses universal truths and a fixed reality, postmodernism questions these ideas and asserts that there is no universal truth or single version of reality” (Harley, 2001, p. 24).

Libraries have by and large been modernistic entities. As librarians we have created a stable, orderly, controlled, somber environment where we keep truths and our users must heed our instruction in order to access our linear arrangement of the knowledge of the ages.

Postmodern culture is at odds with this world. It is characterized by consumerism; superficiality; knowledge fragmentation; and the erosion of traditional boundaries of time and space, mind and body, real and virtual, humans and technology (Harley, 2001; Manoff, 2000; Martell, 2000). Each of these characteristics can be seen in our society and in our libraries.

Consumerism emphasizes short-term convenience over long-term time and effort. Quality has declined in favor of convenience and low cost. Our students want to shop at a discount center

like Wal Mart and do their research using only information available on the Web in full-text from their personal computer. Diligence, thorough analysis, and evaluation are thrown out the window (Harley, 2001).

Superficiality “reflects a concern with outward appearances rather than underlying mechanisms or meanings” (Harley, 2001, p. 25). Students are not concerned with understanding the library’s classification scheme or organizational structure. Many just want to do whatever is the least amount required to fulfill their assignments.

Knowledge fragmentation may be encouraged by the “postmodernist emphasis on subjective thinking” rather than objective, critical thinking, [i.e. “I am the one who decides what is true and real.”] The World Wide Web with its hypertextual nature, enabling users to jump from page to page or source to source without consideration of context or reliability of information, can cause knowledge fragmentation (Harley, 2001, p. 25).

Erosion of boundaries is another aspect of postmodernism we see in libraries. There is a blurring of the boundaries between the library and the rest of the world through the Internet. One minute I’m in James White Library’s catalog, the next minute, I’m in the University of Notre Dame’s catalog, or taking a virtual tour of a Paris art museum, etc. Catalogs and databases seem to be merging and are becoming interconnected. Patrons are continually shifting back and forth from place to place with different computer windows. The blurring of boundaries can also be seen in the changing work functions of librarians. Functions are all connected. We need to understand a lot about each other to function well together. In the world at large we see a merging of concepts such as popular and elite, entertainment and news, commerce and art, and the academic world and business (Manoff, 2000).

The McDonaldization of Society is George Ritzer’s take on the postmodern society. His theory is based on the idea that the principles of the fast-food industry –efficiency, calculability, control, and substitution of technology for human labor–now pervade other areas of society including higher education and libraries. According to Quinn (2000), the result is dehumanization, a decrease in quality and creativity, and an increase in superficiality. Quinn prescribes creativity, risk taking, and humor as antidotes to McDonaldization.

According to Martell (2000), librarians have become “disembodied” by the Digital Age. We are living in an age of contradiction and four major discontinuities have resulted. The first is the discontinuity of **time and space**, which can be seen in the disregard for body rhythms in favor of machines, and the emergence of cyberspace which is beyond the “spatio-temporal” experience of humans. The discontinuity of **mind and body** can be seen in artificial computer intelligence, the inability to comprehend many things we experience, the fact that the body becomes less important in cyberspace, where only the mind is evidenced, etc. [A cartoon shows a computer savvy dog explaining to another dog, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”] The discontinuity of **real and virtual** can be seen in the television and multi-media worlds, the use of simulation for medicine, military, training, and the Internet. It seems that our real and virtual are

bleeding into each other as real becomes part virtual and virtual part real. The discontinuity of **humans and technology** can be illustrated by computers that talk, genetic engineering, etc. All of these things can cause a sense of disembodiment.

Technology

No one can deny the impact technology has made on society and libraries during the last decade. Barlow (as cited in Shreeves, 2000) has stated "We are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire" (p. 36). Martell (2000) put it this way, "The computer is to the book as the automobile is to the bicycle" (p. 100). A controversy is raging between those who see computer technology as positive and transforming and those who see it as leading to the death of civilization (Shreeves, 2000).

Regardless of whether technology will prove to be a positive or negative influence on civilization, I agree with Hazen (2000) that "Technology will continue to produce faster networks and more powerful computers. The technical means to digitize, transmit, and manipulate essentially all sources of recorded information in two and, to some extent, even three dimensions, will continue to improve" (p. 835). It remains to be seen whether Cossman's prediction that Voice In/Voice Out (VIVO) computers will be "the last nail in written language's coffin," will come true (as cited in Martell, 2000, p. 102).

Technology's Impact on Libraries

The paradox of computer technology in academic libraries has been described as "the age of information, the age of foolishness" (Hardesty, 2000, p. 7). Some of the foolish assumptions include "Everything is now available on the Web and for free!" and "Computers save money."

Most libraries now have one foot on the dry land of the print world and one foot in the digital canoe. If you've ever been canoeing, you know that isn't a position you can hold for too long or inevitably, you'll end up in the water. The time is coming when unless we are able to find new roles in cyberspace, we will no longer be seen as relevant to our clientele (Martell, 2000).

Let's look at some of the problems and benefits of technology to libraries. Here are some of the problems:

- 1) It's beyond the control of the library. We are **trying** to control it through lists and cataloging projects such as OCLC's CORC, but our attempts are like "trying to nail jello to the wall" or cataloging the air (Manoff, 2000, pp. 864-865). [We really are "control freaks" aren't we?!]
- 2) The internet's role in gathering and recording information is unclear. Consequently we're experiencing a lot of uncertainty. We wonder if it will totally replace libraries.

- 3) We need to invent a new library lingo to describe the nuances of digital resources.
- 4) Lack of standardization and authority of internet material creates fear about the future of academic scholarship (Manoff, 2000).
- 5) It's expensive! Whoever said computers would save money did not have the gift of prophecy. Libraries are presently trying to straddle the great divide between print and digital and are forced to maintain both types of resources without the money to do so (Shreeves, 2000). Budgets already strained by rising costs of serials are having difficulty keeping up with the high costs of access, hardware, software, and maintenance. In addition, the electronic materials marketplace is unstable and chaotic (Hazen, 2000).

All right—enough negatives. Let's move on to the positive effects of digital technology in libraries.

- 1) It really does save patrons a lot of time.
- 2) It provides access to resources for distance learners.
- 3) Its impact on interlibrary loan has made global resource sharing more feasible (Hazen, 2000, p. 830).
- 4) Through hypertext, connections can be made between documents, and to multimedia resources.
- 5) "The confusion and destabilization generated by digital technology [present] an opportunity to finally address some of the limitations of traditional library access and organization" (Manoff, 2000, p. 872).
- 6) Digital technology allows for fluidity of scholarship. It's easier to update a Web edition than a print edition of a manuscript when new ideas or information come to light (Manoff, 2000).

The Impact of Postmodern Culture and Technology on Library Liaison Programs

We can see from the brief history at the beginning of the presentation that liaison programs began primarily for collection development and were one of many individual, rather distinct functions in the library. During the 1990's liaison roles expanded to include communication, public relations, library instruction, and specialized reference. We are now at a point where liaison programs are moving toward the center—becoming the cornerstone or hub of the library for promotion, marketing, resource development, and the creation and provision of library services.

It is predicted that, "Libraries will function as nodes within increasingly diffuse networks of

virtual information” (Hazen, 2000, p. 833). Librarians will provide links, maps, and guides to help students, faculty and community members at their institution and across the globe navigate complex information networks.

There will, therefore, be changes in the roles of library liaisons in the near future. Some roles will diminish; new roles will take their place.

Look for the collection development role to diminish as publisher approval plans and large aggregate collections of electronic materials, such as Net-library, become more popular (Hazen, 2000).

New and expanding roles for library liaisons:

- Libraries will be user centered rather than collection centered. Liaisons will be involved in customizing information for users (Okerson, 2000). They will be able to create “multi-user domains with comfortable interaction zones for various participants and a set of virtual services and products responsive” to individual needs (Martell, 2000, p. 111).
- “Distributed collections,” where institutions make an agreement that each will collect in certain areas which they will share with each other, may become more important. Liaisons will be involved in developing these collections (Hazen, 2000).
- More emphasis on communication about library services and programs.
- More support for non-traditional students and distance learners.
- Grant writing and fund raising.
- Specialized reference for students and faculty (Hazen, 2000).
- More involvement in selection of digital resources (Hazen, 2000).
- Continuous assessment to maintain a user focus (Tennant, 2001). The use of postmodern assessment techniques such as focus groups, interviews, observation, etc. can help liaisons look at relationships and inter-connectedness (Ray as cited in Rockwell-Kincannon, 2001).
- Shaping new “information spaces”--guides which organize information by topic or discipline (Manoff, 2000).

Practical Suggestions for Liaison Programs in the Present and Future

- 1) Develop a vision for the future that focuses on user needs, wants, and practices (Okerson, 2000).
- 2) Strengthen consortial relationships (Okerson, 2000).
- 3) Strengthen relationships with faculty and administration (Farber as cited in Hendrix, 2000).
- 4) Continually upgrade the electronic infrastructure (Okerson, 2000).
- 5) Be proactive—let all faculty know about expanding roles of liaisons (Tennant, 2001).
- 6) Ask to be placed on departmental mailing lists.
- 7) Serve on curriculum committees.
- 8) Find ways to involve students in resource development (Risser, 2000).
- 9) Attract students to the library through attractive study spaces and special events.
- 10) Go to the students and serve them in departments, dorms, the student center, and as academic advisors (Harley, 2001; Studdard, 2000).

Afterword

As a college student in the late 60's and early 70's I studied three literary works that attempted to predict the future through the genre of science fiction—*Brave New World*, written in 1932 by Aldous Huxley; *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, written in 1949 by George Orwell; and *2001, A Space Odyssey*, screenplay by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick in 1968. I recently revisited these three works.

I found that though some of our present concerns, particularly about technology and loss of privacy, were predicted by the authors, many were not. We don't really know what the next ten or twenty years will bring to libraries and librarianship—what new colors and patterns will emerge.

I'd like to close with a quote from Okerson (2000) about the future of libraries which I particularly like, "Both catastrophe and utopia are unlikely. The future will resemble the present and the past most of all by being just a little more of a muddle and a little less simple than we might prefer. We are left to choose the way we will navigate the muddle" (p. 691).

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